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Saigon — The killing of Mr. Cone has revived a debate among U.S. civilians here over whether they should carry personal weapons.

American civilians here long have been divided over whether they should own and carry arms when traveling outside clearly secure areas. Mr. Cone was on a road in a supposedly pacified area six miles from the city limits but temporarily penetrated by Viet Cong stopping and searching cars.

U.S. policy is that American civilians are permitted to own personal weapons and carry them when they decide it is necessary for their protection. They can borrow U.S. Army weapons without difficulty while operating or traveling in uncertain areas.

The dispute over wisdom of carrying guns runs this way:

The group opposed argues that if an American's car is stopped by a Viet Cong roadblock and he has a gun he probably will die in a fight or be executed as a suspected Central Intelligence Agency or military man in uniform. A civilian may be allowed to proceed if he is unarmed or be captured and ultimately survive, it is contended.

The other side of the argument is that the gun gives you a chance to shoot your way through rather than accept capture or execution.

When traveling by car with armed military men, civilians sometimes are asked to accept weapons, to add another gun to the party. Some accept while others refuse.

Instances can be cited to support either side of the argument. U.S. Operations Mission official Robert Kelly, a former Army officer, was carrying a pistol when ambushed. He shot back, the Viet Cong ducked for

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cover and he sped safely through the roadblock. Unarmed George Fryet was captured on Christmas Day, 1961, by two unarmed Communists after a hand-to-hand fight. Many believe a pistol would have saved him. Mr. Fryet finally was released after a long ordeal.

Gustave Hertz of Leesburg, Va., was unarmed when captured a month ago. It is believed Joseph Grainger was unarmed when captured last Aug. 8, but it would have made no difference since his car hit a roadmine and he reportedly was taken while dazed. Mr. Grainger later was killed after he escaped and refused to return to captivity.